DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 538 IR 013 210

AUTHOR Vooijs, M. W.
TITLE Changing Children's Perceptions of Violent Television Programmes by Curricular Intervention.
PUB DATE Sep 87
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the European Conference for Research on Learning and Instruction (2nd, Tubingen, West Germany, September 19-22, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Followup Studies; Foreign Countries; Junior High Schools; *Preadolescents; Pretests Posttests; *Programing (Broadcast); *Television Viewing; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Critical Viewing; *West Germany

ABSTRACT

In this study, a nine-lesson curriculum designed to teach 10- to 12-year-olds to become more critical consumers of violent television programs was developed and evaluated. Data from an experimental field study conducted immediately after the intervention showed that children perceived violent television programs more critically, and the gap between children's and adults' perceptions had been reduced substantially. It was also found that most types of children could benefit from the curriculum. In a follow-up study two years later, the permanence of the effects of the curriculum were assessed, and it was found that some of the effects were still demonstrable. Copies of the charts and graphs used as overhead transparencies with the presentation are appended. (5 references) (Author/EW)

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CHANGING CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENT TELEVISION PROGRAMMES BY CURRICULAR INTERVENTION

Paper presented at the Second European Conference for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI), Tübingen F.R. of Germany, September 19-22, 1987

Dr. M.W. Vooijs
Center for Child and Media Studies
Leiden University, Dept. of Education
Rijnsburgerweg 169, 2334 BP Leiden
The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The recognition of the impact of television on children has raised a call for education to start teaching children critical TV viewing skills. Although there have been several isolated attempts to develop curricula in this educational field, little is known about their effects. In this study a nine-lesson curriculum is developed and evaluated. The overall objective is to teach ten to twelve-year-olds to become more critical consumers of violent TV programmes. In an experimental field study, the effects of the curriculum have been assessed immediately after the intervention. In addition, the question has been investigated to what extent the curriculum bridges the gap between children's perceptions of TV violence and those of adults. Finally, the question has been investigated which types of children benefit most from the curriculum. In a follow-up study two years later, the permanence of the effects of the curriculum have been assessed. The results as measured immediately after the intervention showed children to perceive violent programmes more critically, and the gap between children's and adults perceptions to be reduced substantially. Generally, these effects did not depend on child characteristics. As shown by the follow-up study, some of the effects were still demonstrable two years later.

INTRODUCTION

The recognition of the impact of television on children has developed into a call for education to start teaching children critical TV viewing skills. Teaching these skills should enable children to resist the undesirable consequences of television viewing and to benefit from television more fully (Pearl, Bouthilot & Lazar, 1982). Until now, there have been several isolated attempts to develop curricula in this new educational field. Because only a few curricula have been evaluated, knowledge concerning teaching critical TV viewing skills is disappointingly limited (Anderson, 1983). To learn more about the possible effects of television curricula, a study has been designed in which a critical TV viewing curriculum was developed and evaluated extensively. The curriculum's subject was TV violence. This aspect of television is very popular among children. As children grow older these kinds of programmes are increasingly preferred. The curriculum has been developed for children in the upper grades of elementary school. Even so, parts of the curriculum are usable in the lower grades of secondary school as well.

THE CURRICULUM

Goals

The general goal for the curriculum is to teach children to have a more critical attitude towards violent television programmes. To determine in which respects children should take a more critical attitude, a study was done on the entry behaviour of children aged 10 to 12 (Van der Voort, 1986). From this study it could be shown that children in this age-group increasingly have lesser readiness to notice violence in films, and children who viewed

violent movies more often were inclined to notice the least violence in films. It appears that children become habituated to violence, which includes indifference to violence and a less emotional reaction to it. The first objective of the curriculum offers resistance to this effect of habituation. Children should take a more serious view of violent actions (higher readiness to notice violence).

Secondly, the study showed children to be very uncritical regarding the use of violent actions in films, especially those of the "good guys". Most of their actions are approved, even as the good guys exceed their power. For example, if the police take a statement from a suspected person in a very violent manner, children do not protest. Nor do they protest if a policeman used his gun unnecessarily. This datum gives rise to the second objective of the curriculum. Children should take a more critical stand on the moral aspects of violent actions on television, and must be aware of the immorality of a lot of them (less approval of violence).

Finally, the study demonstrated that many children are not aware of the difference between film and reality. That does not account for all types of films. With increasing age, children do learn to recognize the imaginary character of films like the Hulk, or the A-team. However, more realistic films like crime-series are perceived as credible. Most children think these films give a good idea of reality, and they are not able to perceive unrealistic elements in them. The third objective is based on this datum. Children should learn to recognize the characteristic differences between life as portrayed in violent television programmes and reality (lower perceived reality).

Method

The curriculum comprises nine lessons of 45 minutes each. In the lessons an instruction booklet and

videotapes (showing interviews with experts and sequences from original TV programmes) are used.

The method employed can be characterized as a persuasive communication strategy (Himmelfarb & Eagly, 1974). Following this strategy, new and relevant information is presented in the hope that children's perceptions of violent TV programmes become more critical. Much of the information is provided by experts. In this way the information will hopefully become more powerful so that the changes in children's attitudes and perceptions will be enlarged. The seriousness of acts of violence is among other things emphasized by confronting children through television interviews with police officers who have killed a suspect in real life, and with victims of acts of violence. The injustice of many acts of violence is made clear to children by pointing out that the number of occasions on which people on the right side of the law can use violence is strictly limited, and that the police use their guns considerably less often than films suggest. The unreal and romanticised picture crime films often give of reality is brought to notice by a Dutch private investigator and a police detective, who on the screen comment on their colleagues' behaviour in films and give an explanation of the differences between films and reality.

Children are given opportunity to practice and process what they have learnt by having them answer questions in a workbook, and through class discussion. Apart from this, the newly obtained knowledge is put into practice by having children watch new film fragments and giving them specific tasks, such as paying special attention to the cause of an act of violence; to what extent an act can be considered morally acceptable or realistic. Previous to showing a cross-examination scene, children are for instance asked to pay attention to possible mistakes made by the police during the

cross-examination. And during a shooting or fighting scene, for instance, special attention has to be paid to how the police react to the victim, or the children are asked to determine to what extent the police acts conform to the instruction on violence.

THE EFFECT STUDY

Design

Beforehand, various versions of the lesson programme have been evaluated formatively and adjusted on the basis of evaluation data (Vooijs, 1986). A definite version of the lesson programme is subjected to a summative evaluation study. This evaluation study uses a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design, in which nine experimental classes are subjected to the curriculum (N = 221), and nine classes are used as controls (N = 216). The experimental classes received the nine lessons over a five-week period. The children were pre- and post-tested on four criterion variables; (1) readiness to notice violence; (2) approval of violent actions; (3) perceived TV realism, and (4) factual knowledge. In order to examine to what extent the curriculum bridges the gap between children's and adults perceptions of violent programmes, the same criterion variables were measured for a group of adults (N = 110). In addition to these dependent variables eight child variables were included in the study: (1) SES, (2) age, (3) sex, (4) viewing frequency, (5) preference for violent programmes, (6) identification with TV characters, (7) agressiveness, and (8) scholastic achievement. These variables were selected to examine which types of children benefit most from the curriculum. Finally the permanence of the curriculum effects were investigated by retesting the fourth graders in the original sample (N = 111) two years later.

Results

A comparison of the test scores of the experimental group with those of the control group demonstrates that the curriculum is effective in all regards. Children appear to take a more serious view of violent actions on television and these actions are less readily approved of. With regard to both the readiness to see violence and the approval of violence, the initial gap between children's and adults' perceptions is reduced by about half by the curriculum. Secondly, the curriculum causes children to perceive violent TV programmes as less realistic. In this respect the curriculum is very effective indeed. The children in the experimental group see violent TV programmes as less realistic than the norm group of adults. Finally the curriculum results in an increased knowledge of the facts discussed in the lessons; this factual knowledge approaches that of adults. The changes in children's perceptions seem to have been induced by this increased knowledge: children with the highest achievement scores show the greatest changes in their perceptions.

The curriculum effects hardly interact with the child variables. Only one interaction is found between the child variables and the effects of the curriculum. Fourth graders do not take violence more seriously and do not change their moral judgement of violent actions. As appears from their pretest scores, these children already have a critical attitude towards these actions.

The follow-up study demonstrates that effects of the curriculum on factual knowledge and perceived TV realism still exist after two years. However, the differences between the experimental and control children appears to be reduced, partly by maturation on the children in the control group, partly by weakening of the impact of the lessons. On the two remaining criterion variables, no delayed effects can be demonstrated.

CONCLUSION

The results show that children can, in as short a time as nine lessons, acquire a more critical perception of TV violence. In pursuing this educational goal, the employed "persuasive communication strategy" seems to be effective. Since the effects of the curriculum generally do not depend on child characteristics, most types of children are susceptible to this kind of curricular intervention. However, the reduction of curriculum effects over time suggests that critical TV viewing lessons must be embedded in more extensive curricula. By repeating and discussing facts and information about television in another meaningful context, effects of critical TV viewing curricula can be maintained and deepened. The curriculum which was subjected to this study will be implemented by way of the Dutch school television. On basis of the curriculum a television programme has been made which consisted of six units. The programme will be broadcasted at the end of this year.

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APPENDIX

COPIES OVERHEAD SHEETS

INFORMATION ABOUT CURRICULUM

Target group :-upper grades of the elementary school

Objectives :-higher readiness to notice violence
-less approval of violence
-lower perceived reality of violent programmes

Method :-nine lessons (45 min. each)
-instruction booklet and videotapes
-persuasive communication strategy (new and relevant information / experts)
-viewing exercises

DESIGN EVALUATION STUDY

Sample : -three exp. schools (N=221)
-three contr. schools (N=216)

Design : -pretest-posttest-retest-control-group-design

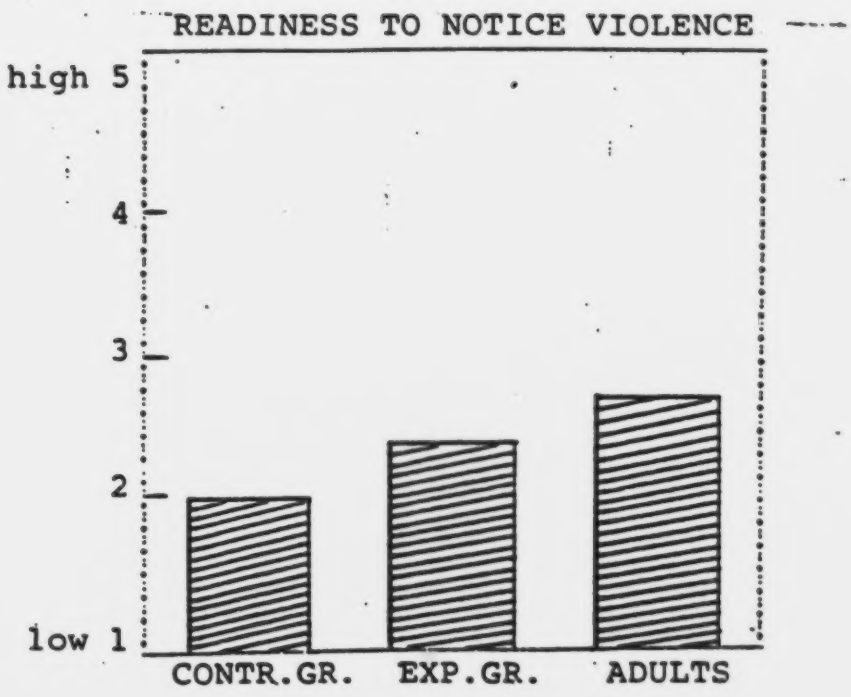
Criterion variables : -readiness to notice violence
-approval of violent actions
-perceived TV realism
-factual knowledge

Child variables : -SES
-age
-sex
-agressiveness
-scholastic achievement
-viewing frequency
-preference for violent programmes
-identification with TV characters

Standard : -adults perception of violent programmes

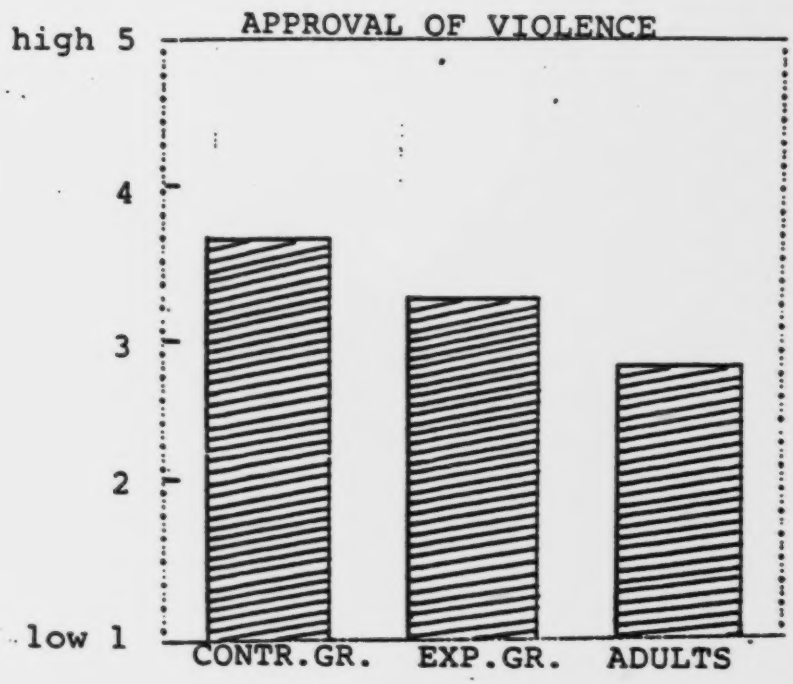
Sheet 3

POSTTEST: READINESS TO NOTICE VIOLENCE

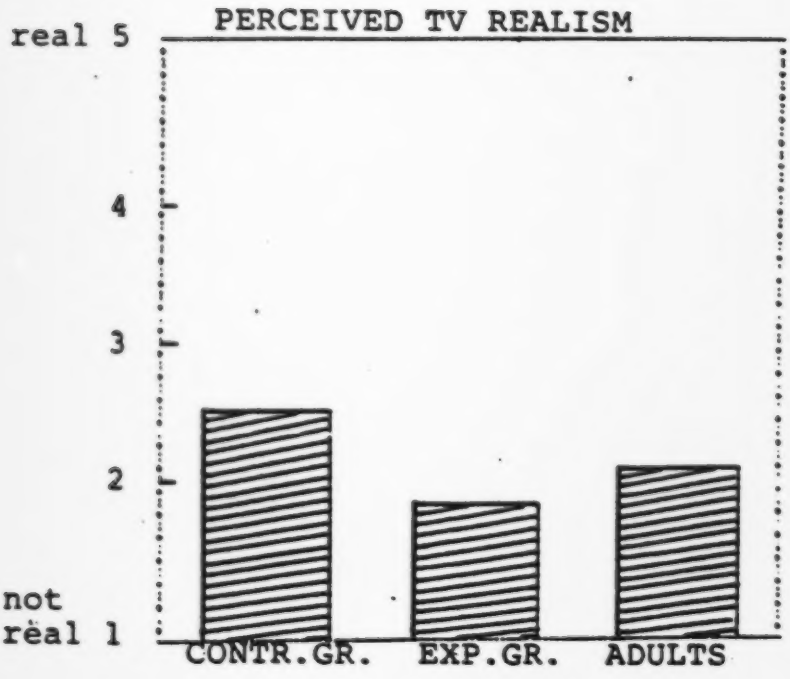


Sheet 4

POSTTEST: APPROVAL OF VIOLENCE

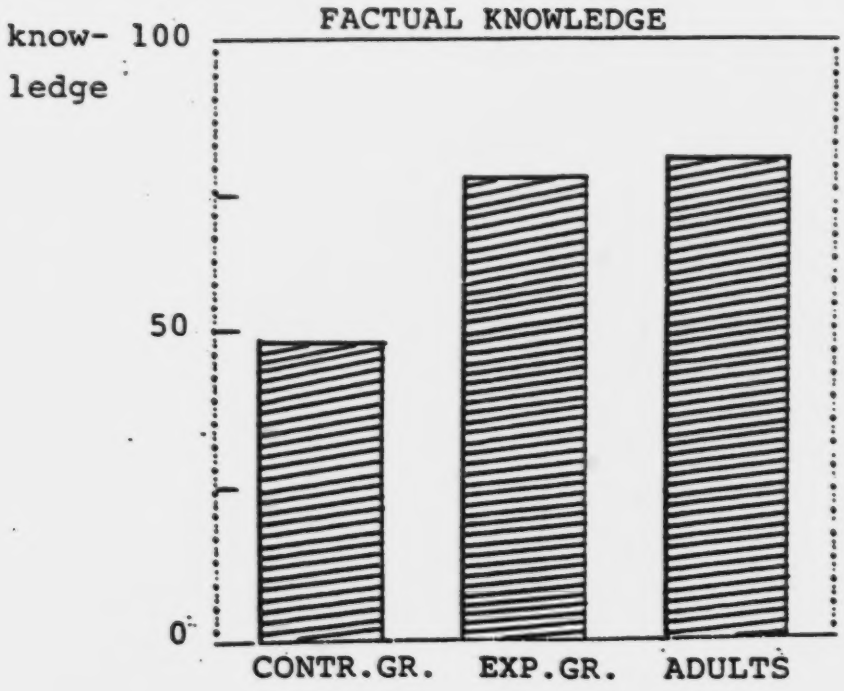


POSTTEST: PERCEIVED TV REALISM



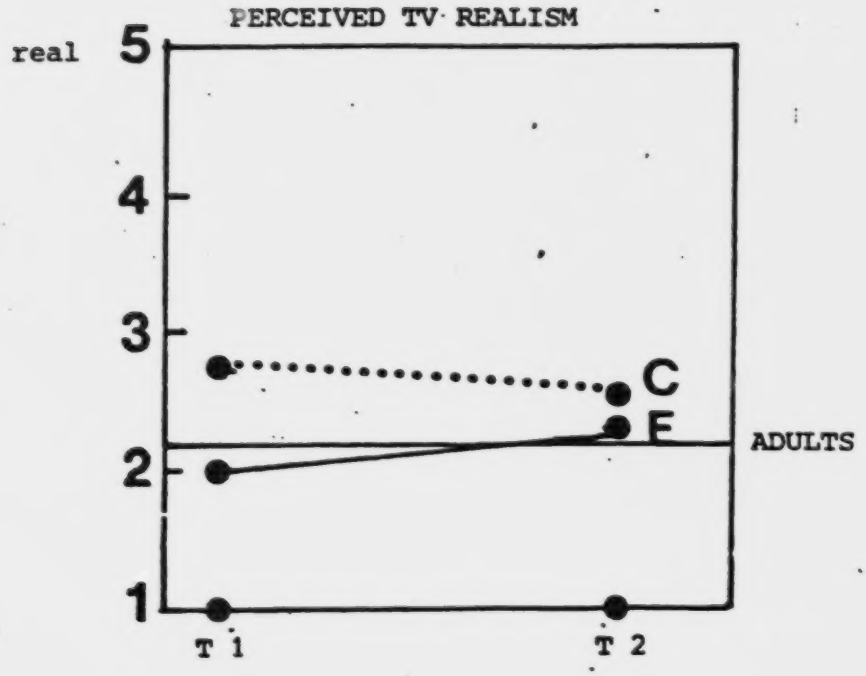
Sheet 6

POSTTEST: FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE



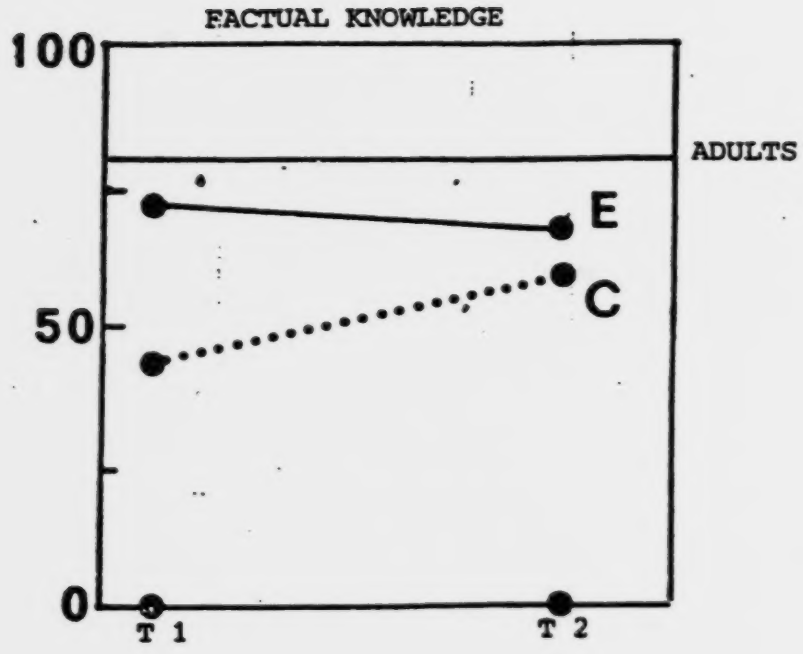
Sheet 7

RETEST (TWO YEARS LATER): PERCEIVED TV REALISM



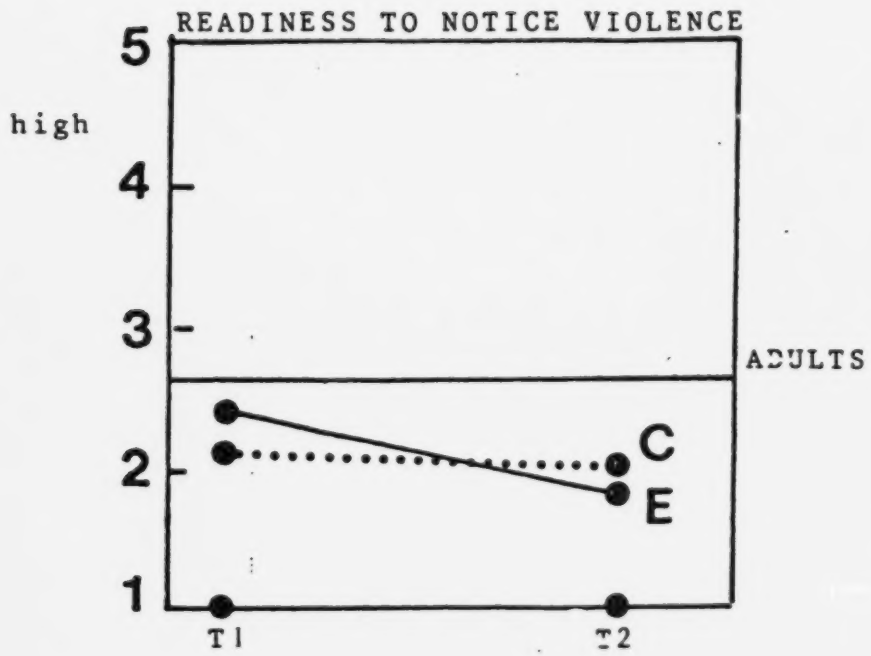
Sheet 8

RETEST (TWO YEARS LATER): FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE



Sheet 9

RETEST (TWO YEARS LATER): READINESS TO NOTICE VIOLENCE



Sheet 10

RETEST (TWO YEARS LATER): APPROVAL OF VIOLENCE